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ABSTRACT

The first in a series on parenting education, for American Indians, the booklet looks at preparation for parenthood. Learning to be a good parent begins when one is a child, watching our parents and copying their ways with our own children. The booklet recognizes problems and needs of new parents. Some problems are an unplanned pregnancy, loneliness and pain of giving birth, and when the caring of the baby is one parent's responsibility. Needs of a new parent include planning a pregnancy; both parents sharing in childbirth; both parents helping to feed, diaper, and bathe the baby; rest for the mother; and parents taking a short time to be away from the children by themselves. (ERB)

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Introduction

Raising children is the hardest job you'll ever have. No one can do it alone. Both the mother and the father play important roles in bringing up children. Other family members (aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, etc.) can help too. Don't ever be afraid to ask for help.

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The main reason why raising children is so hard is because there's never any time off. Parents don't get a vacation from parenting. Sometimes it's hard to see the rewards a being a parent. There are a lot of headaches and heartaches too. But a healthy and happy child is life's greatest reward.

Raising an Indian child is especially hard. We want our children to be proud of their Indian heritage. We also want them to be able to survive in a culture that is often hostile to Indians. We want to be able to live happily too, and it is a constant struggle. The most important part of our struggle is helping our children learn and grow as much as possible.

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Indian children are special. They can help keep alive Indian culture. They can also help make changes in our country so life will be better for everyone. But they need help from us parents. We are the most important people in their lives. They learn from us how to live. One of the ways they learn is by copying us. All children do this. That's why we must always set a good model for our children to follow. For example:

- If we fight and argue all the time, so will our children.
- If we hit each other or our children, they may hit also.
- If we call our children bad names, they will not respect themselves.
- If we ignore their needs, they will not respect us.

But . . .

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—If we praise and reward children, they develop a better self-concept.

—If we show affection to each other and to our children, they will grow up to be more loving adults.

—If we learn to control our tempers, so will they.

—If we show respect for each other, they will respect us more.

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Preparing for Parenthood

Learning how to be a good parent begins when we are children. A lot of people think it begins when we have a child. It really begins much earlier. It starts when we are toddlers, and we watch how our parents act toward us. We learn many things from watching our parents. Often we will copy their ways with our own children. Caring for babies and children should be shared by both parents. The father, as well as the mother play major roles in child rearing. We will be able to raise healthier and happier children if we do it together. We will be happier adults too.

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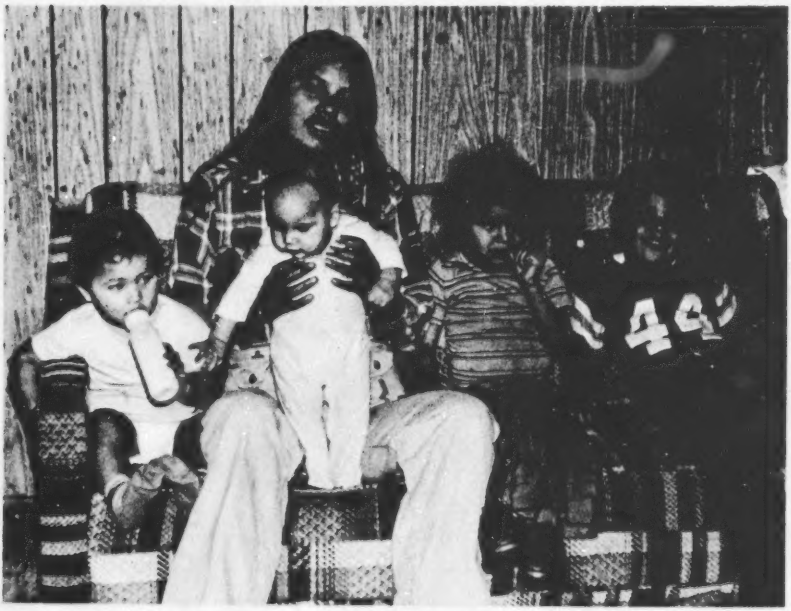
In our history and culture, both parents have always shared the responsibility of caring for our children. Children need their father's love and attention just as much as they need their mother's. Both fathers and mothers will fail as parents if they leave all the parenting just to the mother. No one parent can do it all. If a mother has to do it all by herself, she may:

—abuse or neglect one or more of the children

—resent the children

—resent the father

—become ill or depressed



If the father takes a strong role in raising the children, the family will:

—be stronger and healthier

—be less resentful of each other

—be more loving and happier

—be able to stop abuse and neglect

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We are teaching our children how to be parents all the time. They learn from us how to treat their own children. We can help them be better parents if we get help for ourselves. We should never be ashamed to ask for help. Some of the ways we can get help include:

- —Taking a parenting education class
- —Asking for own parents or relatives for help and advice
- —Asking other parents for help or advice
- —Asking for help from community agencies. Some examples are:
  - Planned Parenthood
  - Parents Anonymous
  - Family and Children's Services
  - Churches
  - Urban Indian Centers
  - Indian Health Service Clinics
  - Tribal Social Services
  - Crisis Shelters

In many communities the Community Health Representative may be utilized.

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The New Baby

When we start our families, we need help in understanding good parenting. There are a lot of things that happen that we feel unprepared for. If we know what to expect, we can handle it better. In this series of booklets we will discuss special areas where many parents face problems. Some problems can be avoided by good preparation. Others cannot. But if we know what to expect, we can handle it better.

These are some important areas we need to know about:

—Children's developmental stages and needs—Booklet III

—Health and Hygiene—Booklet II

—Discipline Skills—Booklet IV

—Parent-Child Communication

—Teaching Your Child About Indians

We will cover these things in other booklets. This booklet tries to talk about some of your needs as a new parent.

We begin to face the many problems of parenthood before the child is born. Sometimes the pregnancy is not planned. Often it is seen as a burden or a drag. It interrupts our relationships and life style. It adds to our overstretched budget. It may even cause health problems. Pregnancy is a very emotional time. A lot of feelings come to the surface. Some of these feelings are fear, rejection and anxiety.

For these reasons, it is good to plan pregnancies. Birth Control is easy to practice. If a pregnancy is planned, the problems that arise seem smaller. It means that you have both decided you want to have a child. It means you are both willing to make the changes required to raise children. If only one parent makes changes in life style, or if one parent refuses to share responsibility for a child, it is unfair to the other parent. We realize that many times there is only one parent

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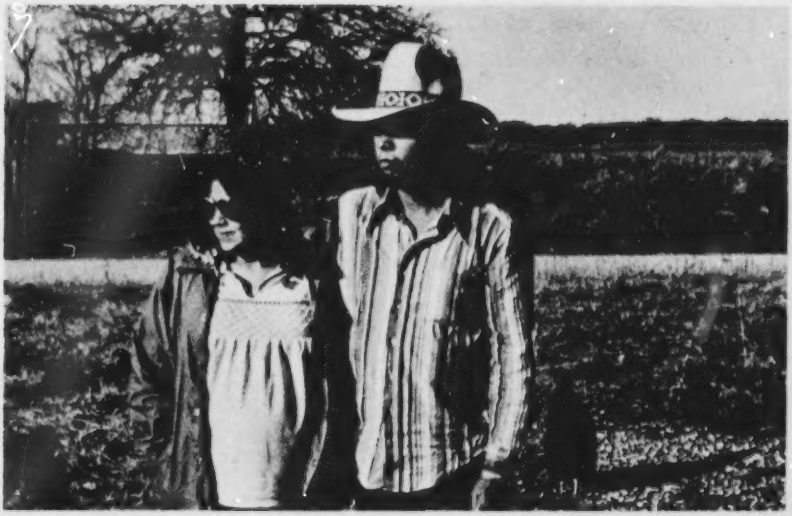

Child birth is a wonderful experience. But it can also be very painful and lonely for the mother. The parents may decide to be together during birth. This is something to think about. Shared pain is usually easier. Shared joy is always better. Such sharing helps hold families together.

The first child sets the stage. The biggest changes occur with the first child. Learning to care for an infant is hard. The first six weeks are the hardest. Many family members can help.

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Fathers can help feed, diaper and bathe the baby. In the first weeks the baby learns who its parents are. Caring for the baby is constant. Mothers are tired after a child birth and need a lot of help. This is true with every birth of a new child.

New babies need constant care. They need to see a doctor regularly; they need food and clothing; and they need love. As they grow older, these needs change a little, but still remain. It is almost impossible for one person to meet all these needs. If only one person tries to do it all, it becomes too much. That person may even become abusive or neglectful. The baby may not thrive. The parent will feel guilty. Guilt is not good. It keeps us from being happy. An unhappy parent means an unhappy child. Our baby's health and happiness depends on us. If we want our children to be healthy and happy, we must meet our own needs also.

An important need of parents is rest. If a new mother doesn't get enough rest, her milk may not be adequate for the baby. If parents aren't rested, they're more cranky and irritable. If *our* needs as parents aren't met, how can we meet our children's needs?

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Parents can recognize their own needs. They can tell each other: "I need this" or "I need that." They can ask each other to help out. One of our biggest needs is help. If we have help, we don't feel so overwhelmed.

We need to take breaks. We need time just for ourselves. As the baby gets older, we can ask other family members to watch it for short periods. Maybe grandparents can keep the child overnight or perhaps for whole weekends. It's like a short vacation from parenting. We need these kind of breaks from time to time so we can return to our children rested and happy. In this way, we are less likely to become violent or abusive with our children, providing we have occasional rests from the constant care they require.

The father can keep the baby while the mother goes shopping. Or the father can do the shopping with the baby while the mother naps. Frequent breaks and short vacations will help us be better parents.

We learn real fast what some of our baby's needs are. We know they need food. They cry when they're hungry or wet. We can feel when wet diapers need changing. We know when they are tired and need to sleep. Sometimes they just want to play. babies need constant attention. Children always need attention. So do adults. We all need to feel loved.

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As children grow, their needs begin to change. Soon they will need shots and other medical help. They need to learn how to take care of themselves. We have to show them how to button their shirts, tie their shoelaces, hang up their clothes. We are the ones who encourages them to crawl and walk, and to talk. Before long, however, their needs outgrow us. They have to go to school.

As children's needs change, parents have new needs too. The other booklets in this series talk about these new needs. Learning to meet our own needs as parents will help us meet our children's needs.

Remember, parenting is the hardest job you will ever have. You cannot do it alone. All of us need help. We can help each other in many ways, and we must not be afraid or ashamed to ask. Our children are special blessings, and we want to help them all we can. You are taking the first big step toward being a better parent. Be proud of yourself for this. Everyone will benefit from it.